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Teo, T. (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology*. New York: Springer.

is based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama Buddha, who was born – probably in the fifth century BCE – into nobility in the Hindu caste system. The fact that early Buddhist thinking had a Hindu background influenced the directions of Buddhist arguments and explains why parts of the theoretical framework of Buddhist and Hindu psychology somewhat overlap. Moreover, the fact that the main body of early classical Buddhist texts is written in Pali and Sanskrit, explains why the first and still important accounts of Buddhist psychology in the West stem from Indologists while most Western psychologists remain unfamiliar with Buddhist psychological texts even today. Unfortunately, only a few of the essential texts, which were also written in other Asian languages (e.g., Tamil, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Tibetan), have been translated into a Western language, and the quality of many of the translations is highly disputed (de Silva, 2005). In addition, Buddhist psychology has different schools that have different scholarly traditions corresponding to different lines of Buddhism. Nevertheless, the following sections will focus on a few aspects shared by most of the Buddhist traditions we know of today.

Definition

Since “psychology” is a Western term closely connected to the scientific study of the human psyche as it was conducted in the late nineteenth century especially in Germany and the USA, the term “Buddhist psychology” is commonly used to characterize elements of Buddhist thinking and practice that touch upon the observation, description, and analysis of phenomena deemed psychologically relevant from a Western psychological standpoint. However, since the Buddhist investigations of mental phenomena as well as their role in human well-being play a fundamental role for the larger system of thought known as Buddhism, the term “Buddhist psychology” should be recognized as a coherent cognitive framework and belief system that as a whole plays a psychologically important role in shaping the culture-specific developmental contexts of many

Buddhist Psychology

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Introduction

“Buddhist psychology” refers to central aspects of a manifold philosophical, psychological, and spiritual tradition of thought and practice that was originally developed and systematized in India during the last 400 years before the Common Era (BCE). The earliest account of this tradition

human beings. The Indologist Caroline Rhys Davids who translated many important texts from Pali into English and was the first to use the term “Buddhist psychology” emphasized both its narrower and broader meaning (Rhys Davids, 1900/2003).

Keywords

Abhidhamma; four noble truths; eightfold path; therapy; *skandhas*; theory of dependent origination; identity; nonself; meditation; indigenous psychology

Traditional Debates

Most classical debates are rooted in two crucial outcomes of a series of council meetings during the centuries following the Buddha's death. First, these meetings resulted in a collection of canonical texts, known as the “three baskets” (*tripitaka*): The *sutta pitaka* is said to contain the original teachings of Siddhartha Gautama Buddha, the *abhidhamma pitaka* contains comments on these teachings and places them in a larger systematic context, and the *vinaya pitaka* lays down sets of rules for the community of monks. Parts of the *sutta* and especially the *abhidhamma pitaka* can be considered the textual foundation of Buddhist psychology. The second crucial outcome was a lasting separation of Buddhism into two forms: the “path of the elders” (*theravada*) or “small vehicle” (*hinayana*) and the “great vehicle” (*mahayana*). The *hinayana* form of Buddhism held that only the *tripitaka* texts based on the teachings of the movement's founder have authority; the *mahayana* form held that other texts and commentaries, including texts that were still to come, are also fundamental to Buddhist thinking. In the following centuries, a third form of Buddhism developed: Tantric Buddhism or the “diamond vehicle” (*vajrayana*).

The debates that accompanied the development of these main schools and their various

branches with their different psychological assessments were mainly about the development, function, and meaning of identity; the role of cognition, interaction, and communication in the construction of psychological phenomena; about causality, intentionality, and mind; as well as the nature of certain states of consciousness, including awareness and the perfect inner peace called *nirvana*. Some basic aspects of Buddhist psychology resulted from the debate of the Hindu assumption that identity is an essential and permanent feature of a person, which Buddhism denies. Although Indian Buddhist scholars like Asanga, Buddhaghosa, Candrakirti, Dharmakirti, Dignaga, Nagarjuna, Shantideva, Santaraksita, and Vasubandhu – to name just a few – disputed this and related topics among themselves, key elements of their and later Buddhist's theories can be described by taking the “four noble truths” as a starting point in order to show how the Buddhist theory of the “nonself” (*anatma*) is explained (cf. Kalupahana, 1987; Pickering, 1997). These truths denote the insights Siddhartha Gautama had during his Enlightenment, namely, (1) life is filled with physical and psychological suffering (*dukkha*); (2) the source of our suffering is our attachment to things, which is driven by our desires (*tanha*) and our failure to realize that everything we passionately crave for, including our ego, is merely transient; (3) the cessation of suffering can be reached by extinction (*nirodha*) of our desires through the attainment of dispassion; and (4) the eightfold path (*atthangika magga*), which leads to the cessation of suffering, requires the development and exercise of wisdom and intellect, morality and adequate conduct, awareness, and meditation skills. The content and structure of these four assumptions show that the diagnosis of suffering is partially psychological, identifies cause and effect relationships between perceptions, emotions, and motivations that are also psychological, and prescribes a cure that can be understood as a cognitive and behavioral, that is, psychological therapy (Kwee, Gergen, & Koshikawa, 2006). Since these main facets of Buddhist psychology

are also reflected in its detailed analysis of the self-concept, this analysis will be used to illustrate the general character of Buddhist psychological theory and practice in the following.

According to the Buddhist psychological analysis of the self-concept, one's "I" consciousness is constituted by five aggregates (*skandha*): (1) physical form (*rupa*), which includes the four elements: earth (solidity), water (liquidity), fire (temperature), and wind (expansion); (2) sensations and feelings (*vedana*), which refer to unpleasant, pleasant, or neutral sensations (touch, sound, appearance, smell, taste, and mental object) that result from contact between any of the six internal sensory organs (body, ears, eyes, nose, tongue, and mind) and external objects; (3) perception (*sanna*) of physical form, sound, appearance, smell, taste, and spirit; (4) mental formations (*sankhara*), including stereotypes, prejudices, and habits from which the six expressions of will emerge, which can be directed toward all of the sensations and perceptions specified above; and (5) consciousness (*vinnana*) of the six sensory organs and the external objects assigned to them.

Humans are thus described as an aggregate of different mutually causal factors that are in constant flux, transient, and temporary. The six internal sense bases (organs) and their six external sense bases (objects) are called the 12 sense bases. The 12 sense bases and the six forms of consciousness are together called the 18 elements (*dhatu*). When the physical factors are also taken into consideration, every mental procedure can be described as a specific combination of elements with the perception and volition phenomena they cause. This analysis is based on the Buddhist theory of dependent origination (*pratityasamutpada*) according to which all phenomena arise and cease to exist as a function of multiple nested causes and conditions and the notion that these processes cease when the conditions cease to exist. The theory is empirically supported by the most elaborate introspection techniques, known as meditation, ever developed in the history of psychology. They aim to show that the powerful illusion of a self that witnesses

all these events is created by means of causal interplays that are constantly changing and being restructured and does not correspond to anything in reality because this self is also only the result of a process that is constantly beginning and ending (*samsara*). Thus, the widely spread notion of a personal soul or a lasting identity is refuted. Moreover, one can also understand why this self-concept can be identified as the key source of human suffering: In the causal nexus described above, it bears selfish attitudes and resultant motivations and actions, which finally lead to psychological discomfort.

Interestingly, Buddhism declares the belief in an unchanging and even immortal self an expression of human selfishness deeply rooted in psychology: It is out of ignorance, weakness, fear, and desire that man develops the consoling idea of a stable and enduring self. Having started as a critical intellectual and social reform movement, Buddhism aimed to detect the psychological roots of these kinds of irrational beliefs and thus also provided a critical perspective on the psychology of psychology and psychologists.

Critical Debates

The interest in an encounter between Buddhist and academic Western psychology began to take shape in the first few decades of the twentieth century, for example, when C. G. Jung and Erich Fromm along with Zen scholar D. T. Suzuki began searching for the common grounds of Buddhism and Western psychoanalysis. In addition, representatives from humanistic psychology showed interest in the therapeutic value of certain meditation techniques and the holistic perspective taken by Buddhist psychology. Beginning in the 1960s, these topics were popularized by Western Buddhists like Alan Watts and Jack Kornfield. When Francisco J. Varela co-initiated the Mind and Life Institute in the 1980s, many prominent neuroscientists and cognitive scientists, including psychologists, also became interested in an intensive exchange with leading

Buddhist scholars, among them the 14th Dalai Lama and Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Although these kinds of exchanges mark a new quality of interest and exchange, as said before, the scientific value of Buddhist psychology is frequently measured by assessing the degree to which it can be adapted to Western traditions of psychology and integrated into various clinical settings. This, of course, can be seen as an ethnocentric, presentistic, and distortive assessment of “Buddhist psychology” (cf. Pickering, 1997). For example, in Buddhist argumentation, the links between the theory of rebirth and the analysis of self and identity are quite important. However, in this example, Western psychology is only interested in self and identity theory, which is therefore normally decoupled from its original framework and transferred into contexts of Western interest and Western ways of doing psychology. Indigenous psychology, however, holds that any intellectual tradition – including Western or Buddhist psychology – can affect human developmental contexts, including lay theories. This remains true even if scholars from one psychological tradition doubt the scientific value of another tradition and merely use parts of it to form or bolster their own theories. Thus, the debates about the contents, character, and cultural psychological importance of Buddhist psychology also touch on questions very familiar to the areas of postcolonial theory, power politics, and the philosophy of science.

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